**Literacy Equity**

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**Abstract**

Literacy equity investigates the hindrances faced by marginalized learners whose cultural and ancestral experiences are often excluded from traditional curriculum design. These missing narratives in flawed curriculum paradigms ignore the essential connection between self-awareness-based learning and the success of disenfranchised learners.

National literacy data underscores the urgency of this issue: in 2023, only 17% of African American students and 21% of Latinx students achieved reading proficiency.[[1]](#endnote-1) This paper argues that this deficit stems from the systemic absence of contextualized learning within the American public education system. By integrating the unique cultural and historical experiences of students, education can bridge these gaps, providing learners with tools to engage deeply with their identities and environments.

Through my personal experience as a Black American who failed the fourth grade and struggled with literacy, I explore the transformative role that inclusive literacy education can play in empowering students, communities, and society at large. This paper highlights how addressing literacy equity is not just a matter of academic reform but a necessary step toward dismantling structural barriers and fostering meaningful change for disenfranchised learners.

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# Introduction

Literacy equity examines the understanding of disenfranchised learning lineages. These missing narratives in flawed curriculum design neglect the vital connection between self-awareness-based learning and the success of disenfranchised learners. National literacy data reveals a troubling decline in reading comprehension and proficiency among African American and Latinx students. In 2023 only 17% of Black students, 21% of Latino students, scored at proficient level. This paper explores how this deficit and national crisis stem from the absence of contextual learning within the American public education system. I argue that incorporating the “missing narratives”—the unique and holistic experiences of students’ cultural and historical backgrounds—can address this critical flaw.

As a Black American and a product of K-12 public education, my personal experiences have shaped my advocacy for literacy and educational success among Black and Brown students. I witnessed firsthand how public education systems respond differently based on demographics, from failing the fourth grade to excelling in advanced English courses in high school.

I recount my educational experiences, comparing them across grade levels, access, and demographics, to highlight the absence of intentional contextual learning. These reflections, coupled with scholarly research, reveal the harsh literacy crisis affecting Black and Brown students. Through my experiences, I illustrate how students like me often become disengaged in K-12 settings.

As I advanced into higher-level classes and college courses, I noticed a stark demographic disparity: most students were White, followed by Asian students, with Latinx and African American students significantly underrepresented. After graduating, I began teaching in Maryland and witnessed this inequity firsthand. I was assigned two classes comprised predominantly of Black, Latinx, and IEP students—groups labeled as “challenging” by the department. These classes, plagued by severe behavioral issues and a lack of support, had been without a teacher until I joined mid-year.

Literacy equity must be framed as a social justice issue, engaging Black and Latinx college students to champion literacy reform as a critical civic and social priority. Partnerships with churches, schools, community organizations, and other grassroots movements are essential to this effort. Establishing literacy hubs can enhance access and raise awareness, serving as both resources and rallying points for equity-driven education reform.

Literacy equity is a deeply personal topic for me because I was directly affected by it. In elementary school, teachers often tested our reading proficiency aloud in front of our peers to assess our ability and comprehension. This typically happened at the start of the year, making it an embarrassing and isolating experience for students who struggled.

Students who struggled were often grouped and placed in different classes as the years progressed. By middle school, classrooms reflected a clear divide in academic ability. I noticed that many of the students who struggled with literacy shared household challenges similar to mine.

These challenges often included living in a single-parent household, having an incarcerated family member, or being raised by grandparents. Certain grouping characteristics revealed a broader pattern of educational disengagement and systemic neglect.

As I progressed into higher-level classes and college courses, I observed a stark demographic disparity. Most students were White, followed by Asian students, while Latinx and African American students were significantly underrepresented.

After graduating, I began teaching in Maryland, where I experienced these inequities firsthand as an educator. I was assigned two classes composed predominantly of Black, Latinx, and IEP students—groups labeled as “challenging” by the department.

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# Literature Review

Literacy equity examines the experiences of disenfranchised learning lineages. These missing narratives in flawed curriculum designs disregard the essential connection between self-awareness-based learning and the success of disenfranchised learners. Allison Rose Socol, Ph.D., vice president of P-12 policy, practice, and research at Ed Trust, works to highlight inequities, propose research-based solutions, and collaborate with advocates to push for systemic change in the P-12 education system. Socol underscores the gravity of this crisis by quoting Frederick Douglass: “Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.”[[2]](#endnote-2) She further asserts, “Currently, a literacy crisis is happening in the U.S., one that disproportionately affects students of color and cannot be ignored.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Socol’s research and commentary offers that the literacy crisis is not an incurable issue. On the contrary, some stakeholders, educators, and institutions perpetuate the harmful narrative that marginalized students lack the “intellectual capacity” to read. Socol categorically rejects this claim, calling it a lie.

This false narrative has been widely circulated in the educational experiences of black and brown students who are taught that they cannot succeed academically. For many families, this institutional response results in students being placed on lower educational tracks, further limiting their opportunities to thrive.

Socol highlights that Frederick Douglass challenged the dehumanizing belief that enslaved people lacked the intellectual capacity to function as American citizens, drawing attention to the persistence of this narrative today. Where does this narrative appear, and how is it perpetuated? The institutional response to non-literate students often assumes that they lack the inherent capacity to succeed. These ideas underscore that the literacy crisis is not a result of students’ abilities but rather a reflection of how the educational system chooses to respond to their needs.

The fact that any child—let alone the majority of children—attends school without being taught to read is both deeply concerning and entirely preventable. Socol emphasizes that this crisis is preventable, offering a critical perspective by (1) demonstrating that educational professionals have conducted research and proposed solutions to address the literacy crisis, and (2) revealing that educational systems have deliberately chosen not to implement changes necessary to resolve it.[[4]](#endnote-4)

In *Overemphasizing Individual Differences and Overlooking Systemic Factors Reinforces Educational Inequality*, a group of scholars argues that discussions of structural and systemic barriers must address how institutions, policies, and conditions have been designed to perpetuate oppression, domination, discrimination, and inequities.[[5]](#endnote-5) This highlights the intentionality within educational systems to sustain these inequities. Similarly, Frederick Douglass fought to decry claims that marginalized people lacked intellectual capacity, directly challenging systems of oppression and domination. Both works serve as foundational building blocks, revealing how marginalized learners have been subjected to institutionalized “slave rhetoric” within the classroom.

The article further compares this issue globally, noting that in India and Pakistan, individual approaches like remedial learning classes are considered ineffective in addressing low academic attainment. Instead, the authors advocate for structural reforms to government schools, emphasizing the need for systemic change to benefit marginalized students.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The U.S. education system is accused of creating gaps between racial groups as well as disparate opportunities in education and employment.[[7]](#endnote-7) This article highlights how the system often ignores the contextual identities of students while simultaneously reasserting educational dominance. Together, both articles connect cultural identity, literacy, and socioeconomic status to the educational outcomes of marginalized communities. They also reveal that the solutions offered to marginalized learners often fail to address the deeper systemic issues that influence how literacy functions and develops.

“Decades of research shows that when students receive explicit and systematic instruction across all of these domains, they will learn to read. And when students are given access to texts with rich, diverse characters and cultures, seeing people like themselves fully represented in school materials, they become more engaged readers.”[[8]](#endnote-8) This highlights the critical role of representation in fostering literacy growth. The author also warns that many districts and schools continue to rely on outdated teaching methods and curricula, despite evidence showing that these approaches are not only ineffective but harmful.

  According to the National Library of Medicine, many existing or proposed interventions fail to account for learners’ contextual realities, including structural and systemic barriers such as poverty and marginalization.[[9]](#endnote-9) This failure often results in reproducing a deficit discourse, which places the blame for poor educational outcomes on students rather than addressing systemic inequities. The need for contextualized interventions stems from students being disconnected from meaningful and relevant learning experiences.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Throughout this paper to understand my thesis, I want to insert that *disenfranchised lineage of learning* should be interchangeable with what scholar's regard as *contextualization,* often followed by poverty, and marginalization which can be defined by the same article as “the ways that institutions, policies, and conditions have been created that reify oppression, domination, discrimination, and inequities. This reinforcement is demonstrated in the claims presented through research (1) institutional resources directed toward school policing, and zero-tolerance policies, expulsion/suspension rates. [[11]](#endnote-11) (2) Racial incongruence between students and teachers due to predominantly White teaching population in the U.S. is linked with lower teacher expectations, differential tracking, and underrepresentation of students of color in gifted programs.[[12]](#endnote-12) (3) Curricula and assessments are not designed for minoritized students.[[13]](#endnote-13) (4) and most importantly, content and pedagogical approaches often are disparate from the lived experiences of Black and Latine students, which is problematic given the importance of relevance for achievement motivation.[[14]](#endnote-14)

*Disenfranchised learners* can be defined through the lens of “structural and social inequality”, which offers that “students face differential access to formal schooling, wide ranges of teaching quality, inequitable school resources, gender discrimination, and linguistic barriers. In addition, they may be privy to widespread poverty and intersectional disadvantages across gender, disability, caste, and ethnic, and regional axes”[[15]](#endnote-15)

Drawing focus to literacy equity, I call upon the work of James Batten who shares The end of Reconstruction was a blow to African- Americans and ushered in a bleak period of *their history.* Yet, blacks took advantage of the time by increasing their literacy.[[16]](#endnote-16) The chart demonstrates that in 1865 African America literacy was at five percent and by 1930 it grew to 80% this is because literacy was a defined process.[[17]](#endnote-17) Particularly for blacks after the Emancipation Proclamation and the civil war, in sixty-five years literacy among blacks grew 75% this is because (1) “blacks became convinced that education was power, more than that, education was freedom; even more than that, there was a spiritual element to education: education was redemption. (2) They understood that “educating blacks occurred in the ‘complex, textured relationships.[[18]](#endnote-18)

“While blacks appreciated in the most cases the efforts of the “schoolmarms”, they decided that the long-term solution to the problem of their illiteracy was to teach each other.[[19]](#endnote-19) When analyzing *complex and textured* relationships we must understand that ignoring what fosters literacy, and adequate *educational* learning for disenfranchised learners is a process deserving of extended processes that work.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Research further reveals that “The relationship between white and blacks in the schools was not an easy one. Educating blacks occurred in the complex, textured relationships” between northern whites, southern whites, and southern blacks.[[21]](#endnote-21) Relations with northern missionaries sometimes proved challenging—for southern blacks and northern whites could be partners and combatants” as mentioned earlier disenfranchised learners is identified as the process of “content and pedagogical approaches often are disparate from the lived experiences of Black and Latine students, which is problematic given the importance of relevance for achievement motivation.”[[22]](#endnote-22)

Essentially, the process cured by blacks *teaching themselves* literacy through understanding literacy in a spiritual way has been eliminated or rendered invisible from curriculum, and the sector of public education. Further connecting that this process is blatant, and intentional adding to this “complex, textured relationships.

I consider the words of Fredrick Douglass in The Narrative of the life of Fredrick Douglass he shares that “learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy”.[[23]](#endnote-23) [[24]](#endnote-24) These words help us to connect the argument that literacy is a complex issue for disenfranchised learners; one in this case that is viewed both spiritually liberating, and also hard as one learns about their *disenfranchised lineage* which helps us to see the deficit that educational systems offer when they do not deal with the complexity of literacy in relation to marginalized learning.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), “84 percent of Black students lack proficiency in mathematics and 85 percent of Black students lack proficiency in reading skills”[[25]](#endnote-25) while this research does not explicitly suggest illiteracy, as *functional illiteracy* is the idea behind it. However, these unsuccess's helps to see that if black students particularly are underperforming it means they are missing the foundational experiences from how most African American people in this Country came to learn about reading after slavery; from redemption, to spirituality, and even culturally.

To add Fredrick Douglass idealism, and enlighten through literacy, understanding his lineage, and his connection to marginalization when effective curriculum devoted to offer a multiliteracy module it’ll foster some frustrating views. “Bell Hooks, for instance, closely examined how African American students from low-income working families were the most vocal about issues related to socioeconomics and “about issues of class” (p.182). Hooks 1994) found that African American students “express [ed] frustration, anger, and sadness about the tensions and stress they experience trying to conform to acceptable white, middle-tensions and stress they experience trying to conform to acceptable white, middle-class behaviors in university settings”.[[26]](#endnote-26)

The process of the literary experience is one that does not consider (1) literature that ties in with the experience of those reading (2) Presents a robotic function and approach to reading (3) Does not provide a gain of knowledge about oneself, or learn from the books presented—instead, just learn to read. As mentioned earlier Douglass shares that reading was an experience that made him view his literacy as a curse through what he gleaned about *himself,* and his “fellow slaves”, Douglass regarded that he learned about slavery through reading a transaction between a slave owner and his slave. What if our introduction to literacy gives us little to no information about ourselves, or really the World around us. Essentially, the invitation to reading is a flawed process.

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# Methodology

This research discovers an interdisciplinary approach, combining national literacy data, cultural analysis, and scholarly commentary to examine literacy equity and propose a ministry model addressing the issue. The methodology is grounded in three steps.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

I began by analyzing national literacy data to identify the scope and demographic breakdown of the literacy crisis, particularly among African American and Latinx students. Sources such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) provided concrete statistics, including proficiency levels and the systemic disparities in literacy outcomes. This quantitative analysis revealed the stark underperformance of marginalized students in comparison to their peers, forming the foundation of my argument.

**Scholarly and Historical Contextualization, and Ministry Model**

To explore the root causes of literacy inequity, I engage with the works of key scholars and historical figures. Allison Rose Socol’s research illuminated the systemic barriers within American public education and highlighted actionable solutions.

Historical perspectives, such as Douglass’s reflections on literacy as both liberating and burdensome, provided a lens for understanding how marginalized communities have historically approached education. Bell Hooks insights on socio-economic and cultural pressures faced by African American students further contextualized the emotional and systemic challenges tied to literacy.

Building on the research, I propose a ministry model to address literacy equity. This model emphasizes collaboration with churches, schools, and community organizations to create literacy hubs. These hubs would foster engagement through culturally relevant content, advocacy training, and grassroots mobilization. The model is informed by the insights gained from scholars

# Ministry Model

Addressing the literacy crisis P-12 public school systems must first be acknowledged as a critical social issue. As an organizational leader and community organizer I have learned the importance of thoroughly analyzing social challenges. However, literacy among Black and Brown communities are not being widely discussed, despite disquieting data highlighting the severity of the issue.

While issues such as homelessness, substance abuse, and elder neglect often dominate public discourse, literacy- especially within disenfranchised communities—receives insufficient attention. American colleges and universities should serve as incubators for change, particularly for Black and Latinx students who are positioned to raise civic and social awareness about literacy. This issue should stand alongside other pressing topics, such as Social Security and access to higher education in America.

I argue that the literacy crisis deserves broader commentary, critical thought, and theorizing—particularly in light of alarming literacy proficiency rates in K-12 education. A well-developed pitch, combined with a civic appeal and grassroots mobilization among college students, can ignite this movement. Given recent political discourse, including threats to eliminate the Department of Education, organizations must act swiftly to create thought-provoking spaces and deploy advocacy tools capable of building momentum.

Recognizing national data that frames literacy as a crisis allows hosting organizations to cultivate communal responsiveness. As the interim Executive Director of Community Uplift Services, I spearheaded efforts to coordinate and blueprint solutions.

I coalesced a durable and pluralistic board spanning five states, composed of individuals with expertise in education and government. These board members directly witnessed the alarming educational data that underpins the literacy crisis. Together, we set ambitious goals to establish literacy hubs in ten cities within the first year; of these, four were successfully launched before my relocation to Washington, D.C. During our mobilization efforts, a recurring question emerged: *How will you ensure the effectiveness of this initiative?*

 I emphasized that meaningful responses to social issues often do not originate solely from policymakers. Instead, I argued that we must center this issue within the community by addressing literacy apart from protests or focusing narrowly on specific schools or districts. Our approach prioritized collaboration with individual schools, national districts, church organizations, and community leaders to foster widespread literacy access and education.

We aimed to create organizational spaces dedicated to literacy equity, leveraging social media platforms and brand management to elevate this issue to a national crisis requiring immediate action. By digitizing the learning platform, we provided accessible tools for readers. For example, a simple QR code could connect individuals to an online literacy community and events designed to inform and inspire action toward literacy equity.

The organization would establish unique partnerships to advance its philanthropic mission of promoting literacy equity. This effort would include fostering meaningful conversations, training advocacy ambassadors to address local literacy needs, and collaborating with organizations, philanthropists, and corporate stakeholders.

Additionally, the organization would work with equity experts to create strategies that engage students and stakeholders through online platforms, literacy training hubs, and resource centers. These hubs would provide tools for real-time engagement, such as surveys and live streams. Finally, developing and implementing a comprehensive five-year strategic plan would amplify the literacy conversation and reduce illiteracy rates incrementally.

# Conclusion

Literacy equity is more than just “reading”, and it takes us to dissect and examine why certain demographics are disenfranchised institutionally from equitable outcomes. What might literature ignite, change, or evolve? Nelson Mandela once said that *Education is the most powerful weapon in which we can use to change the world.* We must look at these processes and bridge the missing narratives. Throughout literacy research, noy only will we find the data alarming but also that educational institutions are not spending money to address this crisis. We must ask why.

Addressing the *subliminal,* yet dominantnarratives that find themselves in our educational systems must begin with educators, leaders, scholars, and those alike to come together and bridge the questions of “why”. We must ask questions like—what does the literacy crisis have to do with us communally, and who does it serve? We must begin with the reality that there is a literacy crisis. When there are narratives, we must be willing to counter those narratives that continues to disenfranchise groups.

We can respond by reimagining how literacy is taught and prioritized, centering it as both a communal responsibility and a transformative tool. This means shifting from outdated, ineffective methods to inclusive, culturally relevant practices that reflect the lived experiences of marginalized communities. Addressing the literacy crisis requires not only systemic change but also grassroots efforts to build literacy hubs, advocate for equitable funding, and integrate contextualized learning into curricula.

The goal is not simply to teach students to read but to empower them through narratives that inspire self-awareness, critical thinking, and agency. Through collaboration between educators, policymakers, community leaders, and families, we can create an educational framework that truly fosters equity, ensuring that literacy becomes a bridge to opportunity, not a barrier to progress.

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Pondiscio advocates for a shift in literacy instruction to address the systemic inequities affecting Black and Hispanic students. His approach emphasizes the importance of a content-rich curriculum over mere literacy skills, critiquing the current system for focusing on “learning to read” without contextualization. Pondiscio’s analysis supports the need for culturally relevant materials that resonate with disenfranchised learners, addressing structural barriers and countering a deficit discourse by highlighting that literacy should go beyond skill acquisition, drawing connections to students’ identities and lived experiences.

**2. Montero, Cecilio, et al. "COVID-19 and Primary and Secondary Education: The Impact of the Crisis and Public Policy Implications in the United States."** *Frontiers in Public Health,* 2023,<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10166032/>

This study examines the pandemic’s impact on educational access and resources, especially for minority and marginalized students, revealing a system rife with inequalities. The authors argue that traditional methods often ignore students’ real-world struggles, such as poverty and marginalization, which are integral to learning outcomes. They illustrate how standardized testing, and inadequate resources reinforce systemic inequities, underscoring your point that educational inequities are often “blatant and intentional.” The article’s focus on institutional failures in delivering equitable education highlights the consequences of missing contextualization for disenfranchised learners.

**3. Douglass, Frederick. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave Written by Himself.** *Rutgers University Libraries,* 1845, <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/33458/PDF/1/play/>

Douglass's autobiography presents literacy as both liberating and burdensome, offering a unique lens on literacy's double-edged nature for marginalized individuals. His reflections resonate with your thesis by highlighting literacy as a pathway to self-awareness about one’s societal position, revealing the harsh realities of oppression. Douglass’s insight into the complexities of learning to read as an enslaved person echoes the need for an educational approach that does not shy away from the difficult truths of one’s lineage. This text enriches discussions on the disenfranchised lineage of learning, emphasizing literacy's role in confronting oppressive realities.

**4. Smith, Theresa C., et al. "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Promoting Teacher Ideologies and Practices in Diverse Classrooms.*"*** *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 6, 2021, <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/education/articles/10.3389/feduc.2021.704663/full#B21>

Smith and colleagues discussed the importance of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) as a method to engage disenfranchised students. CRP aligns with your argument that current curriculum design fails to consider students’ lived experiences, leaving Black and Latine students disconnected from the content they study. The authors propose an approach where educational success is linked to a curriculum that validates students' cultural backgrounds, thus challenging deficit-based narratives. Their work reinforces the significance of “complex, textured relationships” in learning environments, where content that resonates with students’ realities can enhance both literacy and personal development. 

**5. Batten, James C. “Wiley College and the Literacy Project.”** *Rutgers University Libraries*, <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/33458/PDF/1/play/>

This document explores Wiley College’s historical efforts to promote literacy within African American communities in the Southern United States, tracing its origins back to post-Civil War initiatives. It highlights the college's role in addressing educational inequities by empowering Black students through literacy, underpinned by a mission to foster both academic and socio-political agency. The project underscores the importance of culturally relevant and community-centered literacy programs, revealing how education became a transformative tool against systemic marginalization. By emphasizing literacy as a foundational element of self-empowerment, this work supports contemporary discussions on the need for literacy initiatives to account for students' cultural and historical contexts, aligning closely with calls for literacy equity in disenfranchised communities.

6**. Socol, Allison Rose. "The Literacy Crisis in the U.S. Is Deeply Concerning—and Totally Preventable."** *The Education Trust*, January 17, 2024, <https://edtrust.org/blog/the-literacy-crisis-in-the-u-s-is-deeply-concerning-and-totally-preventable/>.

Socol examines the persistent literacy crisis in the United States, particularly its disproportionate impact on Black and Latinx students. She challenges the deficit-based narratives that blame students’ intellectual capacity for underperformance, arguing instead that systemic failures in the educational system perpetuate inequities. Socol highlights that addressing this issue is not only possible but also imperative, advocating for interventions that include culturally relevant pedagogy and targeted resource allocation. Her article aligns with the argument that literacy equity requires a holistic approach, incorporating students’ cultural and historical backgrounds to foster both academic success and self-awareness. This work supports the thesis that intentional, equity-driven reforms are essential to resolving the literacy crisis.

# Endnotes

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